From bilingualism to multilingual confidence: What the Dear You debate is telling us
By Lily Kong

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From bilingualism to multilingual confidence: What the Dear You debate is telling us

We can continue to invest in mother tongue education while recognising that dialects and heritage languages deserve a more visible place in our cultural life.

Lily Kong

The debate over Dear You is a reminder that language policy here is bound up with questions of identity, memory and belonging. The issue is not whether the film should be shown in Teochew or Mandarin, but whether a language framework that served Singapore well in one era now needs recalibration. PHOTO: CLOVER FILMS

It took a film to reopen one of Singapore's foundational policy questions.

Dear You, the Chinese blockbuster filmed largely in Teochew and centred on the emotional worlds of Chinese migrants to South-east Asia, arrived in Singapore with a peculiarity: Its general release here would be in Mandarin-dubbed form, while the original Teochew version would be confined to limited screenings.

The response was immediate. Tickets to the original-language screenings sold out quickly. Film-makers spoke up. Members of the public questioned why a Teochew-language film could be screened commercially in Johor Bahru, while Singapore audiences were largely offered a dubbed version. Within days, more original-language screenings were added.

On the surface, this may look like a dispute about film distribution. It is not. It is a reminder that language policy in Singapore remains deeply bound up with questions of identity, memory and belonging.

What is at issue is not simply whether one film should be shown in Teochew or Mandarin. It is whether a language framework that served Singapore well in one era now needs recalibration for another.

This is not an argument against bilingualism.

Singapore's bilingual policy has been one of the most consequential and successful pillars of our nation-building project. It gave us a common working language in English, enabling inter-ethnic communication and global connectedness. It also sought to anchor cultural continuity through the teaching of official mother tongues. In a young and vulnerable state, this was not merely educational policy. It was strategic statecraft.

That framework has served Singapore well. But the fact that a policy was right for its time does not mean that it should remain unchanged in all its particulars. Successful policies can outlive the assumptions that first made them successful. Policies are built for historical circumstances; when those circumstances evolve, policy must be open for renewal.

The Dear You debate should be read in precisely that light.

A POLICY THAT SUCCEEDED – AND A CONTEXT THAT CHANGED

Singapore's language settlement emerged from a very specific set of post-independence imperatives.

English was designated the common language of administration, commerce, science and inter-ethnic communication. Mother tongues (Mandarin, Malay and Tamil) were to preserve cultural ballast and civilisational rootedness.

For the Chinese community in particular, the Speak Mandarin Campaign launched in 1979 sought to reduce the fragmentation of multiple dialects and to establish Mandarin as a common language among Chinese Singaporeans.

The logic was clear and compelling for its time. A common working language was essential for social cohesion and economic competitiveness. Consolidating Chinese dialect use around Mandarin was seen as necessary to support bilingualism and to prevent a proliferation of linguistic divides.

By most measures, the policy succeeded. English became the principal language of work and schooling; Mandarin became the dominant Chinese language among younger Singaporeans.

But the very success of that settlement has produced a different challenge. The concern is no longer that dialects will overwhelm English or undermine Mandarin learning. It is almost the reverse: that heritage languages and dialects may disappear from everyday life so thoroughly that what is lost is not merely vocabulary, but also cultural memory, intergenerational connection and part of the texture of Singapore's plural past.

That is why Dear You has touched a nerve. It has surfaced a question that extends beyond one film: If the bilingual policy has already achieved its core objectives, is there room to loosen the governance of the cultural domain and release it from assumptions forged under a different set of anxieties?

For many, the objection to dubbing is not ideological but cultural. A language carries far more than semantic meaning. It carries rhythm, humour, silence, kinship terms, emotional registers and historical memory. A film made in Teochew about Teochew migrants is not fully the same film when dubbed into Mandarin and the plot remains unchanged. Something in the grain of the work is altered.

Nor is this simply a Chinese dialect issue. The broader question is whether Singapore can now consider linguistic diversity as a resource to be stewarded rather than a problem to be managed.

In a more mature Singapore, perhaps we should ask whether there is room to preserve the discipline of bilingualism while making more space for the complexity of multilingual life.

The question before us is not whether bilingualism was right. It was. The question is whether a framework designed for the imperatives of the 1960s and 1970s can be reconsidered to be responsive to the complexities of the 2020s and beyond.

The answer, I think, is that the foundations remain sound, but the superstructure needs renewal.

WHAT THE EPISODE TELLS US

The episode tells us at least four things.

First, there is real demand for original-language cultural expression, including in heritage languages that do not sit neatly within our official language architecture. The strong response to Dear You came from audiences who wanted to experience the film in the language in which it was performed and emotionally textured.

Second, younger Singaporeans are not indifferent to linguistic heritage, even if many do not speak those languages fluently. There is, among some, a genuine desire to reconnect with the languages of their parents and grandparents, whether through films, music, oral histories, community initiatives or family conversations. This desire should not be romanticised, but neither should it be dismissed. It is part of a broader search for rootedness in an evolving and maturing society.

Third, it tells us that our current language arrangements may be too blunt in the way they treat different domains of life. The language of schooling, the language of administration, the language of artistic expression and the language of cultural memory do not all need to be governed by the same logic. A policy framework designed to ensure coherence in education should not automatically be transposed onto cinema, theatre or heritage work.

Fourth, Singapore is mature enough to move from a defensive posture on language to a more confident one. We are no longer the uncertain state of the 1960s, balancing fragility on multiple fronts. We are a far more established society, with strong institutions, a more sophisticated arts ecosystem and a population accustomed to navigating multiple linguistic and cultural worlds.

If we still believe that exposure to dialects in public cultural life threatens the foundations of bilingualism, we may be underestimating the resilience of the very policy we seek to protect.

WHAT SHOULD CHANGE – AND WHAT SHOULD NOT

To say that language policy should evolve is not to argue that everything must be reopened. Some fundamentals should remain.

English will and should remain Singapore's common working language. It is indispensable to our social compact and global orientation. Mother tongue education should also remain an important part of our schooling system, for the reasons that anchored them in earlier times.

The question is how to move from a bilingual policy designed primarily for economic necessity and social engineering towards a broader language policy suited to a more culturally confident society.

That renewal could take place in at least three ways.

SEPARATE EDUCATIONAL DOMAIN FROM CULTURAL DOMAIN

The most immediate lesson from Dear You is that Singapore could consider a clearer distinction between language policy in education and language

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Heritage languages deserve more prominence

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policy in cultural exhibition.

It is entirely reasonable for the state to preserve a structured bilingual framework in schools. It is much less clear why the same logic should continue to shape what can be shown in cinemas in original form, especially when subtitles provide accessibility.

A Teochew film screened in Teochew does not weaken the teaching of Mandarin in schools any more than a Japanese film screened in Japanese weakens the teaching of English.

A sensible reform would be to establish a more permissive default for the public exhibition of films in heritage languages and dialects, subject to the same classification and content rules that apply to other films.

This should not apply only to imported films. It should also support local film-makers, theatre-makers and content producers who wish to work in dialects, mixed registers or other community languages.

REFRAME DIALECTS AS CULTURAL ASSETS

Heritage languages are part of our intangible cultural infrastructure. They are repositories of migration histories, ritual vocabularies, kinship systems, humour, oral traditions and worldviews. Their value is not reducible to whether they are efficient languages of modern administration or mass schooling. Their value lies also in what they carry across generations.

If that is accepted, policy could move beyond ad-hoc accommodation to active stewardship. This could include support for subtitled screenings of heritage-language films; grants for oral history projects and digital archives; greater encouragement for museums, libraries and arts institutions to programme work in dialects and other community languages; and partnerships with clan associations, cultural groups and schools to document and transmit these linguistic traditions.

This principle should apply across communities, not only to Chinese dialects. If we are serious about pluralism, Malay variants, Indian languages beyond Tamil and other heritage languages should also be seen as part of Singapore's cultural commons.

UPDATE THE RATIONALE FOR MULTILINGUALISM

Finally, Singapore could revisit how it explains language learning to the next generation.

For decades, the rationale for bilingual education has been framed in instrumental terms: economic usefulness, civilisational roots and social discipline. These arguments have merit, but do not capture the wider value of multilingualism in a culturally dense society.

We would benefit from a more expansive language imagination. Languages are not only tools of utility. They are also ways of entering other worlds of meaning. They allow access to literature, memory, humour, prayer, family history and social nuance. They can deepen intergenerational relationships.

In this sense, language has value beyond market reasons and could be a form of human and civic capability. Not every Singaporean must or can become fluent in heritage languages. But it can still be appreciated in cultural programming.

FROM BILINGUAL DISCIPLINE TO MULTILINGUAL CONFIDENCE

There will be those who worry any loosening of older restrictions risks unravelling hard-won gains. That is valid. Language policy in Singapore has always been entangled with race, class and national cohesion. It is because the issue is so consequential that change should be thoughtful rather than impulsive. We must not confuse continuity with wisdom, nor must we confound change with unproductive disruption. The goal might be to hold together both commonality and complexity with confidence.

I believe we can do so.

We can retain English as our common working language. We can continue to invest in mother tongue education. And we can also recognise that heritage languages and dialects deserve a more legitimate and visible place in our cultural life.

The Dear You episode is valuable. It has given us an opportunity to ask what it means, at this stage of our national journey, to hear ourselves more fully. Not only in the official languages that built institutions, but in the inherited languages that carry memory, intimacy and the traces of journeys that made Singapore what it is.

Bilingualism was one of Singapore's great acts of nation-building. The task now is not to abandon it, but to build on it, by moving from bilingual discipline to multilingual confidence.

• Lily Kong is president of Singapore Management University and a social and cultural geographer whose work has examined topics including national identity, cultural heritage and higher education.